

Southern California region still suffering effects of October oil spill

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Last month's oil spill off the coast of Southern California released an estimated 25,000 gallons of crude into the Pacific Ocean, directly affecting hundreds of thousands of coastal residents and doing massive damage to wildlife habitats in the region. Investigations have now been underway for more than seven weeks while small businesses and surrounding ecosystems are still bearing the spill's long-term effects.

As of this writing, the ruptured pipeline connected to the Elly offshore platform, where the spill originated, remains closed while cleanup efforts continue in the surrounding regions.

According to the University of Southern California Sea Grant Program, which studies oceans and their ecosystems, 5,544 gallons of oil, 13.6 barrels (or 571.2 gallons) of tar balls and 546,782 pounds of oiled sand and debris have been collected from 588 miles of shoreline as of November 8.

Additionally, the University of California-Davis Oiled Wildlife Care Network reported that 116 birds and seven affected marine mammals have been recovered, with only 34 of those birds and one mammal being recovered alive. Since no oiled wildlife have been recovered in recent days, additional rescues have been called off while damage to coastline and other habitats remain unknown pending further investigation.

Nearly two months later, businesses such as fisheries have remained closed due to public health concerns. Public beaches, however, were opened to the public as early as October 11, a mere nine days after the spill started.

Local authorities started seafood sampling on October 24. It is anticipated that this process could take up to six weeks to complete, as a similar time frame was needed for the 2015 Santa Barbara oil spill. Fisheries

and individual fishermen remain in a state of uncertainty pending the outcome of the process.

In a recent interview with Fox News, Eric Zelien, owner of EZ Sportfishing in Huntington Beach, explained how his business has declined during this recent catastrophe.

Zelien stated: "Most of our out-of-towners are rescheduling their trips. It's kind of like when COVID first hit."

Even though Zelien fishes 90 miles off shore, away from the 12-mile no fishing zone imposed by the state, many visitors remain skeptical about the quality of the catch.

Any beachfront businesses that have remained open, such as hotels and restaurants, have seen a decrease in customers due to these same health concerns, contributing to the already dire situation many small business owners have endured during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The environmental and economic fallout caused by the oil spill has caused an influx of lawsuits against Amplify Energy.

Orange County officials are estimating that they will spend close to \$1.5 million in cleanup costs and are planning to sue Amplify Energy if the county is not reimbursed through the regular spill claims process.

Environmental activists are also initiating lawsuits against the federal government for their failure to review and update platforms across California's coastlines.

Miyoko Sakashita, oceans director for the Center for Biological Diversity, cited federal law in a recent lawsuit which states that the government is required to review oil development and production plans in federal waters and revise them in response to changing conditions or activities, but Sakashita states that this

rarely happens.

These oil platforms, built in the 1980s, have not been replaced or reinforced for the past 40 years, suggesting that California coastlines could have dozens of ticking time bombs waiting for the perfect conditions to materialize, causing yet another ecological disaster to occur in the future.

“It is not lawful for them to just continue on with these really old development and production plans,” Sakashita told the Assoicate Press. “The infrastructure is aging and things need to be done differently.”

It should also be noted that Beta Offshoring Company, which manages the oil rig responsible for the oil spill on behalf of Amplify Energy, has been cited a total of 125 times for safety violations and has only paid a paltry sum of \$85,000 in fines in total while continuing to operate unabated.

While dozens of lawsuits have been filed against Amplify Energy, such cases often take years to settle before they are resolved, and many are speculating whether the pipeline owners will be able to pay for all the damages.

Amplify Energy has declined to comment if their insurance will cover all the costs related to the spill and even stated in their annual 10-K report to investors in December of last year, before the spill, “We can provide no assurance that our coverage will adequately protect us from liability from all potential consequences, damages and losses.”

There is also speculation that Amplify Energy will cut their Beta Offshore Company and San Pedro Bay Pipeline subsidiaries loose, allow them to fail and file for bankruptcy in order to avoid any loss in profits which will place all the costs onto the taxpayers themselves as was done during the Santa Barbara oil spill in 2015.

According to experts, this can only happen by shifting responsibility onto someone else, such as their subsidiaries or one of the many ships whose anchor may have damaged the pipeline while traveling to port.

As long as Amplify Energy can prove in court that they bear no responsibility for this disaster, then the company can avoid substantial losses to their profitability.

This is most likely the case given the fact that Amplify Energy has declined, on two separate occasions, invitations to attend public meetings on the

matter.

Dan Steward, vice president at Beta Operations at Amplify Energy, issued a statement explaining the company’s refusal to attend, stating, “Given the various ongoing investigations into this incident, we are not in a position to responsibly answer your questions at this time.”

At a public meeting held November 15, Huntington Beach Mayor Kim Carr raised questions as to why Amplify Energy waited hours to shut down the fractured pipeline after an alarm had notified staff of the oil leak.

“Hours make a huge difference,” Carr stated. “If we had a couple more hours,” then more damage could have been prevented.

One question that remains unanswered is if Amplify Energy overlooked major safety issues or ignored the initial alarm that notified employees of the spill in order to fulfill their quotas.

Amplify Energy reported increased oil production from 1,000 barrels of oil equivalent per day (boepd) to 24,000–25,000 in August, a 2,400 percent increase.

While the investigations continue, some state Democratic Party officials are calling for a reduction or complete phasing out of offshore drilling in California’s coastlines.

Assemblywoman Cottie Petrie-Norris, who also attended the November 15 meeting, stated that “we all know that the only way to prevent this [oil spill] with 100 percent certainty is to end offshore drilling and oil production.”

The calls to end offshore drilling and oil production, however, ring hollow as the Biden administration plans to auction off more than 80,000 acres of oil farms in the Gulf of Mexico in the wake of the COP26 climate change summit in Glasgow, Scotland.

Such disasters and the conditions which give rise to them will continue until there is a working-class movement that will take the oil conglomerates out of the hands of the energy conglomerates and organize energy production on a democratic and scientific basis.



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